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ABSTRACT

This guide for literacy teachers of limited English speaking adult students provides an overview of learning disabilities (LD) and suggests techniques that have been found effective with such students. The importance of understanding the student's background is stressed and a series of interview questions is suggested to elicit information about the student's educational, cultural, and health background as well as the student's current situation. Common characteristics of learning disabilities definitions are listed along with typical characteristics of students with learning disabilities. Suggested teaching techniques are organized into a listing of general principles of instruction (such as teaching new concepts concretely with examples and relating new material to daily life), techniques for students having visual learning problems (such as using visual aids to track student progress), techniques for students having auditory learning problems (such as reinforcing main ideas through rephrasing rather than verbatim repetition), and techniques for tactile kinesthetic learning (such as tracing letters and acting out stories). (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

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ED 401 687

National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center
A Program of the National Institute for Literacy

The Adult ESL Literacy Student and Learning Disabilities

Fall, 1996

Some literacy practitioners who work with English as a Second Language (ESL) students are finding themselves in a quandary. These professionals are baffled. For unexplained reasons they are not making progress with some of their ESL students, yet they are with others. Although these students have demonstrated great resourcefulness in their lives, learning English has become a major obstacle. The literacy professional wants to know why seemingly competent individuals have to struggle so hard to learn. Do these students have a learning disability? If so, how can the learning disability be identified? Which teaching techniques can be used, if indeed the student does have a learning disability (LD)?

Because there has been limited research on teaching adults with learning disabilities and even less on the dual topic of ESL/LD instruction, it is extremely difficult to address these questions. This publication will provide an overview of learning disabilities, suggest techniques that teachers in adult education have found to be effective with students who are learning disabled, and lead the reader to other resources for a more extensive understanding of how to work with the ESL student who may have a learning disability.

OVERVIEW

Background Information

An interview is an important first step in considering whether an ESL student may have a learning disability. The instructor will need background information on the student's learning history to help determine why the student is experiencing difficulty making progress. If at all possible, the interview should be conducted in the student's native language. Depending on the answers to the interview questions that follow, learning disabilities may be eliminated as the cause of the student's lack of progress. The teacher needs to **keep in mind that some ESL students may have some of the characteristics of learning disabilities due to their temporary problems with learning a second language, as well as their cultural differences**. Also, the fact that some people have tremendous difficulty in learning a new language does not mean that they have a learning disability.

An additional outcome of this interview will be some indication of the student's learning style. Learning styles are the different ways in which people take in, process, store, retrieve and express information (Carpenter, 1995). Generally we each have our preferred way of learning but integrate parts of different learning styles depending on the task to be

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mastered. A student with a learning disability will find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to learn in a style in which s/he is not proficient. Knowing how the student learns best will be an important factor in addressing the student's learning problems, especially if that student has a learning disability.

The student should clearly understand why this interview is taking place and how the teacher plans to use the information. Following are some of the issues that need to be explored:

- Has the student been screened for vision or hearing disorders?
- Does the student have any health problems and, if so, how is s/he dealing with them?
- How much schooling does the student have?
- Is the ESL classroom one of his/her first formal schooling experiences?
- How is the student's native language written? Roman alphabet? Left to right orientation?
- Did the student have difficulty learning to read or write in his/her native language?
- Did the student ever have special help in school? If so, what type of help?
- Why did s/he leave school, if other than graduation?
- What was his or her best subject(s)?
- What was his or her most challenging subject(s)?
- How does the student remember things best: hearing, seeing, or doing ?
- Does the student have trouble remembering instructions that have more than one or two steps?
- Does the student have trouble concentrating when there is background noise or background scenery?
- Does the student have trouble keeping track of time?
- Does the print blur, fade, or move when the student tries to read?
- What type of employment did s/he have in the native country?
- Is the student working now? If yes, what is the job? How does s/he like it?
- Are family situations, such as child or elder care, making class attendance sporadic?
- Does the student get the day-to-day English practice needed to become fluent in a second language?
- How long has the student been in an English speaking country?
- What are the student's goals and expectations?

This interview is a first step in trying to determine the best way to teach the student. This list is not set in stone; depending on the answers to the above list, additional questions may need to be asked. For instance, if the student answered "yes" to having a vision test, what were the results of that test? Does the student need eyeglasses, and, if so, are they being worn? Responses to the question about how the student remembers best may provide some indication of the student's learning style. After the instructor reviews the information gained from the interview, a clearer picture of the student's learning needs should begin to emerge.

General information about learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities are often called the hidden disability because people who have a learning disability look like everyone else. There are many useful definitions of learning disabilities. As summarized in *Adults with*

Learning Disabilities: Definitions and Issues,(National ALLD Center, 1995) the highlights found in most definitions of learning disabilities include the following:

✔There are many variations of learning disabilities.
✔ Learning disabilities involve difficulties in any of the following skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, and mathematics.
✔Social skills may be affected by the learning disability.
✔Learning disabilities may be due to a central nervous system disorder.
✔Although a learning disability may be present with other disorders, these conditions are not the cause of the learning disability.

LD can affect employment, social adjustment, self esteem, and the ability to carry out daily tasks. When working with ESL students, it is important to note that a learning disability in the students's first language may have been masked by compensatory strategies; these same strategies may not be available to the learner in his/her new language (Hatt and Nichols, 1995).

Uneven performance and/or unexpected underachievement in a student are significant warning signs of a learning disability. For example, a student may be able to plan and execute a project but gets lost or confused when the instructor gives a number of directions in succession. Another student may have problems remembering tasks that were performed well in previous classes. The instructor is puzzled because there seems to be no apparent reason for these problems to occur. *For more details on specific LD definitions, refer to the resource list at the end of this publication.*

Characteristics that may indicate the presence of a learning disability.

Providing a checklist of typical characteristics of adults with learning disabilities is difficult because their most common characteristics are their unique differences. An adult with a learning disability may exhibit some, but not necessarily all, of the traits found on the following list. It is important that the instructor be aware that most adults exhibit some of these characteristics, and that a "yes" response to any one item, or even a few, does not mean that the student has a learning disability. However, if a student exhibits several of these characteristics over a period of time, to the degree that they are interfering with his/her learning, then s/he may have a learning disability. **The instructor must keep in mind that beginning-level ESL students will have difficulties in many of these areas until they acquire some language proficiency but that, in the absence of learning disabilities, these difficulties will be temporary.**

This checklist provides only an **indication** of a learning disability; it is not a screening or assessment. *For more information on screening and assessment of learning disabilities, refer to the resource list at the end of this publication.*

Does the student have:

Reading difficulties: exhibits problems with word decoding, reading comprehension, rate, fluency, vocabulary, error recognition?

Difficulties in written language: exhibits problems with organizing thoughts, writing stories, spelling, handwriting?

Difficulties with oral language: exhibits problems with listening, speaking, vocabulary, word finding?

Irregularities in social behavior: exhibits problems with family or social relationships, social perception, humor, emotional behavior?

Disorders in attention and concentration: exhibits overactive, impulsive, or distractible, behaviors; has difficulty maintaining on-task behavior?

Problems in organization: exhibits difficulty in task breakdown; planning, managing time, day-to-day organization?

Auditory processing problems: unable to distinguish similar sounding words and letters, difficulty in remembering what was said, difficulty in following more than one instruction at a time, mispronounces words or common sayings?

Visual processing problems: reverses letters, unable to follow a line on a page, poor visual memory?

After the instructor has gathered and processed all the information from the background history, checklist, and other observations, s/he should look for a pattern that may help explain the possible reasons for the student's difficulties and identify potential ways to meet the student's needs. If the instructor suspects that the student may have a learning disability, s/he may elect one or more of the following options:

- ◆ Use the information to plan a program that matches the student's learning strengths and needs;
- ◆ Arrange for the student to have a screening to help clarify the possibility of a learning disability;
- ◆ Arrange for a formal assessment by a professional.

Formal testing presents certain problems for the ESL student. First, the testing should be done in the student's native language, and it may be difficult to find a professional who can do this. Second, many of the accepted tests are normed on native English speakers. Third, formal testing is costly. To secure accurate results, formal testing may need to include an interview, portfolio assessment, and phonological testing along with the gathering of other pertinent data.◆◆◆

TEACHING TECHNIQUES

Techniques and principles of instruction.

Although there is little formal research that relates specifically to teaching techniques for the ESL adult student who has a learning disability, the following information on effective teaching techniques can be useful.

The list has been grouped into four categories; the first provides general principles of instruction for any type of learning style; the second and third provide specific interventions to use with students having trouble with either auditory discrimination and memory, or with visual discrimination and memory; and the fourth provides suggestions for tactile and kinesthetic learning.

The information that follows has been compiled from a number of sources that are listed in the reference section of this paper. They have been found to be useful by many educators of adults with learning disabilities. This list is not all-inclusive.

<u>General principles of instruction</u>

- ■ Teach new concepts concretely; use

specific examples when explaining a lesson.

- Always explain the purpose of the lesson or activity.
- Explain information in a precise way; never make assumptions about what the learner knows.
- Break down learning into small, sequential tasks.
- Present directions one step at a time, using both oral and written demonstrations.
- Provide intensive instruction until the material is mastered.
- Allow ample time for learning a task; a student with a learning disability will take longer to master new material.
- Use physical demonstration of abstract concepts, such as left and right.
- Let the student know what is going to be presented for that class.
- Keep the learning environment free of visual and auditory distraction.
- Preview and review major points, both orally and visually.
- Provide auditory, visual, and concrete cues.
- Make eye contact frequently; this helps in maintaining attention and encouraging participation.
- Teach to the learner's strengths and prior knowledge; build on the experience and language of the learner.
- Be flexible and willing to try different methods of teaching to meet the student's needs.
- Suggest reinforcement activities to be used at home.
- Provide instruction to help the transfer of learning from one task and setting to another.
- Relate new materials to daily life.
- Ask the student to state in his/her own words what has been presented; use the learner as a resource to share knowledge and expertise with others in the class.
- Set-up small group discussions; this allows time for each student to talk and use language they have already developed.
- Simplify language but not necessarily the content by using pictures, charts, maps and diagrams.
- Use ESL students' experiences to introduce activities that appeal to learners' diverse backgrounds and preferred learning styles.
- Combine life skills such as reading medicine labels and filling out forms with phonics, word recognition, and reading comprehension.
- Enhance the student's self-concept by providing success-oriented activities.
- Praise the learner's accomplishments at the end of every session.

Techniques for students having visual learning problems

Visual learning problems will make it difficult for the student to detect differences in forms, letters, and words and to retain a full mental image of what s/he has seen.

- Help the student see his/her progress using checklists, graphs, or other visuals.
- Use simple drawings to clarify new terms.
- Use color for visual impact.
- Use visual aids: overhead projectors, films, videos, slides, chalkboards, flip charts, computer graphics, or illustrations.

- Label items in the classroom.
- Use visual cues, such as highlighting, underlining, drawing arrows or pictures.
- Use assistive technologies such as color coding, calculators, computers, graph paper, etc.
- Teach visual patterns in words, numbers, pictures.
- Be sure print is large enough.
- Select materials with simple visual layouts, e.g., white space.

Techniques for students with auditory learning problems

Individuals with auditory learning problems often have difficulty recognizing differences between sounds and storing and recalling what they have heard.

- Reinforce main ideas and concepts through rephrasing rather than through verbatim repetition.
- Ensure clear pronunciation of complex or difficult words.
- Encourage the student to repeat verbal information.
- Have the student use a tape recorder as a self-checking device for pronunciation.
- Use games, songs, and rhymes to help the student listen and repeat sounds.
- Repeat words that may be ambiguous or have unaccented syllables in them.
- Repeat blended sounds over and over again to help the student differentiate among these.
- Encourage the student to repeat verbal information.

Techniques for tactile kinesthetic learning

Tactile learning is learning by touching and kinesthetic learning is learning by doing. Some students need to feel and manipulate objects to understand a concept. If the instructor wants to teach the difference between soft and hard, s/he could use props such as a cotton ball and a brick to illustrate each concept. To teach up and down, the student may need to actually go up the stairs and down the stairs.

- Use various types of writing tools-pencils, pens, soft "felt tip" pens, large markers.
- Draw or cut out word(s) and letters learned.
- Use clay to make letter shapes.
- Trace letters.
- Use cartons that are moveable.
- Play charades for comprehension.
- Act out action verbs written or pictured on cards.
- Act out stories.
- If possible go on field trips--to grocery stores, malls, airports, bus stations.

Although, at the present time, there are few research-driven tools and instruments to identify and instruct the adult ESL student who may have a learning disability, there are strategies that may help the ESL instructor work more effectively with these students. This factsheet provides a general understanding of learning disabilities and the learning characteristics that may indicate the presence of a learning disability. In addition the sample listings of teaching techniques have proven to be useful in teaching adults with learning disabilities and should be effective with the ESL/LD student. The selected readings and resources listed below will provide the reader with additional information on the subject of learning disabilities and the ESL learner. This list is not all-inclusive but provides a starting point for teachers. ◆◆◆

RESOURCES

Selected Readings/References

Carpenter, W.D. (1995). *Become your own expert!: Self-advocacy curriculum for individuals with learning disabilities.* Little Canada, MN: Minnesota Educational Services. (1-800-848-4912, ext. 2401)

Chapman, J.B.; Vaillancour, B. & Dobbs, C.S. (1980). *Learning disabilities and the adult student of English as a second language*. Macomb, IL: Curriculum Publications Clearinghouse. (800-322-3905)

Colletti, P.M. (1995). Struggling to learn: Learning difficulties in ESL learning. Conduit, pp 1-3. Storrs, CT: A.J. Pappanikou Center on Special Education and Rehabilitation, University of Connecticut, Box U-64, 249 Glenbrook Rd., Storrs, CT 06269-2064.

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National ALLD Center (1995). *Techniques: Working with adults with learning disabilities*. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development. (800-953-ALLD)

Organizations

National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE)
Center for Applied Linguistics
1118 22nd Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037
202/429-9292, ext.200
Internet e-mail: ncle@cal.org; http://www.cal.org/cal/HTML/ncle.htm

NCLE's objective is to provide timely information to practitioners and others interested in adult ESL literacy education.

Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA)
4156 Library Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15234
412/341-1515

LDA is a membership organization for professionals, adults with learning disabilities, and parents of children with learning disabilities. One of LDA's primary functions is the advocacy of educational and rehabilitative legislation effecting persons with LD. Information on publications and membership is available upon request.

National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)
381 Park Avenue South
Suite 1420
New York, NY 11565
212/545-7510

NCLD is a national not-for-profit organization committed to improving the lives of those affected by learning disabilities. NCLD's Information and Referral Service links parents, professionals, and others concerned with learning disabilities with the services they need through a computerized database and trained volunteers and staff. NCLD offers membership to the public, which entitles individuals and organizations to receive a special packet of information on learning disabilities, regular updates on learning disabilities, and a copy of the magazine *Their World.*

Orton Dyslexia Society (ODS)
Chester Building, Suite 382
8600 LaSalle Road
Baltimore, MD 21286-2044
410/296-0232; 800/222-3123

The Orton Dyslexia Society is an international membership organization which serves as a clearinghouse of information for professionals, dyslexics, and parents of dyslexics. The Society promotes effective teaching approaches and related clinical educational intervention strategies for dyslexics and disseminates information related to dyslexia.

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